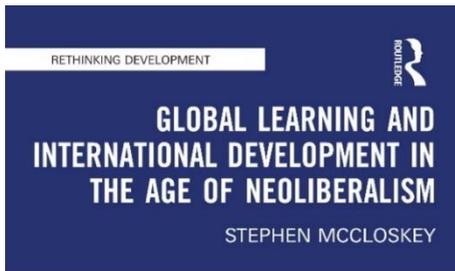


GLOBAL LEARNING AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERALISM

Paula Galvin

McCloskey, Stephen (2022) *Global Learning and International Development in the Age of Neoliberalism*, London and New York: Routledge.



‘The whole world’s in a terrible state of chaos’ is an oft-quoted line from Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* (O’Casey, 1925: 105) and it might well be applied to the world today buffeted and battered and bruised by the pandemic of COVID-19 and the devastation wrought by the climate crisis. Stephen McCloskey’s book is an impassioned call to all those involved in international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and development education (DE) to reconnect with Freirean principles and critically examine how the neoliberalism of the last forty years has harshly compounded inequalities for humanity and the planet. He argues persuasively that the

‘growth fetishism’ of neoliberalism is the ‘ideology at the root of all our problems’ (Monbiot, 2016). ‘Re-engaging with DE practice can help build the capacity of INGOs to challenge the extreme levels of inequality which have characterised the era of neoliberalism’ (McCloskey, 2022: 1).

The book is divided into three parts, each one dealing comprehensively and in a very approachable way to readers, scholars and practitioners interested in DE and global learning. It is also immensely readable interspersed as it is with details of his own experiences in two Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon as well as personal reflections on such issues as Black Lives Matter and the Pink Tide in Latin America. The breadth of his research, his unerring conviction in the possibilities of DE and his quiet passion for his belief in a better world make this a rousing and affecting book.

Part one deals with development education and transformation, harking back to Paulo Freire's concept of praxis; converting education into effective social change. He traces the iterations of DE and other adjectival educations through different configurations and allayed through different ideologies, particularly those of neoliberalism and the relentless push towards 'development' of the global South. The 'liberating' aspect of DE can 'remain distant from the oppressed' thinking of them as 'unfortunate' in their struggles (Freire, 1970). The final chapter of this part looked at how DE is practised in primary and post-primary schools and how it often fits the 'fundraising, fasting and fun' model decried by Bryan and Bracken (2011) and presenting a facile and uncontested view of quick fix solutions to poverty. Drawing on extensive research and on personal experience, McCloskey cites evidence of good practice by the Global Learning Programme in England, Scotland and Wales and the north of Ireland:

“enhancing teacher practice in global learning, integrating DE into school development plans, making substantial advances in supporting a whole school approach to DE, supporting effective partnerships between lead teachers and senior leaders and nurturing peer support and camaraderie through teacher training sessions and twilight seminars” (McCloskey, 2022: 73).

McCloskey goes on to suggest that there are some bright shoots of hopefulness in this sector as they continue to 'sustain innovative and challenging approaches to learning that remain essential in the age of neoliberalism' (Ibid).

Part two firmly attests to the fundamental flaws of our development model, the lack of critical discourse and critical inquiry in this sector and the move from a rhetoric based on radicalism towards a tacit complicity of neoliberal globalisation. This complicity also extends to maintaining an apolitical position regarding the state's role as a driver of inequality, climate change, human rights abuses and poverty through neoliberal institutions and policies (Hilary, 2013). It requires a concerted effort in solidarity to mobilise citizens towards action which will be transformative and emancipatory (McCloskey, 2022: 87).

Massive wealth depends on exploitation of people and of the planet. 'The fairy tale of universal wealth, one day, secures our obedience' (Monbiot, 2021). Our survival therefore depends on disobedience as espoused by Greta Thunberg and the 'Fridays for Future' movement 'to act, and act now, for a better world' (McCloskey, 2022: 124). When the world is 'deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the world is changed into idle chatter, into an alienated and alienating "blah"' (Freire, 1970: 54). It is interesting to note that 51 years later, Greta Thunberg used this very phrase to mock world leaders in her speech at the Youth4climate conference in Milan three months ago. This section also deals with the rise of populist nationalism, racism, and Islamophobia against a background of ever-increasing inequities in health, education, and the alarming destruction of the planet. The urgency to provide the kind of critical consciousness needed in a world of 'fake news' and alternative facts becomes ever more pressing. To express it in Freirean terms, the 'tranquillity of the oppressors' rests on how little the oppressed question the world which they have created.

Stephen McCloskey turns his attention to the notion of de-growth in which the energy and resource use is downscaled 'to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just, and equitable way' (Hickel, 2019: 111). As this idea is firmly rooted 'in sustainability, social justice, and alignment with good practice in the global South, de-growth should be natural territory for the international development and development education sectors' (McCloskey, 2022: 112).

“The INGOs need to problematise growthism and make it central to its advocacy, education, and public engagement strategies. The ticking clock of climate change and the pandemic of poverty created by COVID-19 make this a matter of urgency, not a matter of choice” (Ibid).

Part three details the seemingly insurmountable problems facing the world with damning denunciations for our inability to address and confront real issues and our blind adherence to failing policies regarding the eradication of poverty. Philip Alston, the United Nations Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights said ‘Poverty is a political choice and will be with us until its elimination is reconceived as a matter of social justice’ (Alston, 2020: 12). Describing the International Poverty Line at a dismal \$1.90 as ‘set so low to enable the United Nations and the World bank to call it a pyrrhic victory’ (Ibid). He calls the UN Sustainable Development Goals as being ‘scandalously lacking in ambition’ (Ibid). His assertion that COVID-19 is ‘a pandemic of poverty exposing the parlous state of social safety nets for those in lower income or in poverty around the world’ (Ibid) and the failure of the SDGs to be foregrounded in human rights makes them untenable and irrelevant. McCloskey further details how we are failing those in the global South with funds which are ‘illegally earned, transferred and that include grand corruption, commercial tax evasion and transnational crime and cost the developing countries \$24 in net outflow for every \$1 of aid earned’ (Global Financial Integrity, 2020: 5). To this unsavoury catalogue can be added tax havens and debt and the problems facing those in the global South seeking employment elsewhere.

INGOs have further problems to address with what can be perceived as the systemic racism inherent in this sector. Scholars assert that the ‘sector relies on the maintenance of indigenous territorial dispossession and the management of racialised Others’ (Sriprakash et al., 2019: 6). The ‘white saviour’ mythology would appear to prevail and the narratives of ‘interventionism’ in the global South in times of crisis precludes the ‘historical practices and legacies of colonialism including racism, indigenous violence and extractivism’ (McCloskey, 2022: 160). The perception that the

development education sector is ‘patronising the South and that the development education movement is really speaking, only for white people’ (Chauhan, 2007: 50) needs to be challenged and positive steps taken through stronger BME and DE sectoral links.

Stephen McCloskey has written a powerful book for our times. As a primary school educator and development education practitioner, it confirmed for me the possibility of education as a transformative and emancipatory process. It reawakened my interest in the writings of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux. For students in initial teacher education (ITE), this book could be a useful introduction to these critical theorists and to how their pedagogical approaches have a very strong relevance to teaching today. The necessity of providing our students with the life-long learning skills of critical thinking and problem solving becomes ever more crucial in our globalised and fractured world.

For those working in INGOs and DE, it has the power to reawaken in their imagination and in their consciousness, a sense of hope in creating futures that are sustainable and rooted in social justice and equality. For researchers in the field of DE or international development, it could provide the starting points for much needed conversations on how we ‘re-claw’ development education, how we can provide the space and the audience and the voices to challenge and disrupt and disobey, to engage in the ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ so that we can seek out and establish a:

“new normality and agitate for a human-centred response to the pandemic that prioritises public services, invests in green technologies, downsizes carbon-intensive industries, redistributes wealth according to social need and ditches GDP as a measurement of growth” (McCloskey, 2022: 179).

This is a quietly powerful exhortation to interrogate what we in the DE and INGO sectors are doing and why we are doing it. Are we accepting the status quo, compounding, and perpetuating stereotypes, further alienating and marginalising those in the global South by a blind and unquestioning

adherence to an outmoded, devalued and unwieldy system which simultaneously supports those hierarchies which it seeks to destabilise? This book encourages us to be ‘restless, impatient, hopeful, inquiring human beings, pursuing in the world, with the world, and with each other’ the means by which education becomes ‘the practice of freedom, and discover how to participate in the transformation’ of a fairer and more just world (Freire, 1970: 53).

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